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ABSTRACT

Commonwealth College was the longest lived and most notorious of the resident labor colleges operating during the 1920s-30s. Founded in 1923 at NewLlano Cooperative Colony in Louisiana, the school was modeled on the self-maintenance characteristics of an abortive pre-war experiment in social education: Ruskin College. Disputes over priorities with NewLlano Colony forced the college to relocate to isolated, rural Polk County, Arkansas, in 1924. Commonwealth's early leaders were dedicated Debsian socialists who were convinced that a different type of education for the new industrial class would result in massive social changes, transforming American capitalism into a utopian cooperative commonwealth. Allegations that the college was teaching communism, atheism, and free love and advocating complete social equality of Blacks and Whites led to an investigation by the Arkansas legislature in 1935. Finally, strident local opposition brought a court action that closed the college in 1940. This book presents the history of Commonwealth's extraordinary group of students and staff and the rich intellectual life they produced on the self-sustaining communal farm in the Arkansas forest. The story of this idealistic experiment provides insights into the failure of Marxism in America. Chapters are: Getting There: From Ruskin and Llano to NewLlano and Reality, 1914-1923; The Odyssey to Arkansas and Dramatis Personae, 1923-1924; College Building, 1924-1928: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly; From Utopian Isolation to Activist Isolation, 1928-1931: The End of the Zeuch Era; On Being a Commoner; A Change of Course: Lucien Koch and the "New Commonwealth," 1931-1935; Fatal Attraction: Commonwealth and the STFU [Southern Tenant Farmers Union], 1934-1937; and Better Dead than Red: 1937-1940. (Contains extensive references, an index, and photographs.) (SV)

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